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SUBJECT: FRENCH MFA DAS-EQUIVALENT FOR THE LEVANT ON
SARKOZY'S TRIP TO ISRAEL, SYRIA, LEBANON, AND THE ARAB
DRAFT UNSCR ON ISRAELI SETTLEMENTS

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4. (b), (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: French MFA DAS-equivalent Ludovic Pouille on June 26 provided a rundown of key issues in his area of responsibility, most notably Sarkozy's visit to Israel, French views of where Israel is with Syria and Lebanon, Syria and the July 13 Paris summit, rumors of a Sarkozy visit to Lebanon, Saudi anger with France over Asad's invitation, and French views of the situation in Lebanon. Pouille also indicated France urges the USG to agree to consultations early next week on a draft UNSCR circulated by the Arabs on Israeli settlements. End summary

Sarkozy Visit to Israel

¶2. (C) Predictably, French MFA DAS-equivalent for Levant affairs Ludovic Pouille on June 26 called Sarkozy's June 22-25 visit to Israel a complete success and noted positive feedback not only in Israel and France but the Arab world as well (for more information on the visit, see Paris Points for June 26). He said the focus on political statements and issues instead of commercial contracts and bilateral accords (which had become the norm for most of Sarkozy's official visits) was intentional: Sarkozy wanted to highlight France's support for an Israeli/Palestinian peace settlement sooner rather than later and willingness to play a more active role, unilaterally or as EU president, should the parties so desire. Pouille called Sarkozy's speech to the Knesset "courageous" for its call for a settlement freeze and for establishment of a joint capital in Jerusalem for Israel and a future Palestinian state. He gave credit to the MFA for managing to get that inserted into the final draft without any objection or serious questioning by the Elysee. Among the bilateral accords signed, Pouille noted a civil defense agreement signed by the minister of interior and a separate agreement to provide French assistance in the establishment of a Palestinian industrial park near Bethlehem. Although Pouille claimed there were few side events or meetings, he said the Palestinians greatly appreciate the interior minister's laying of wreaths on Sarkozy's behalf at the tombs of Palestinian political notable Faysal Hussayni and PLO leader Yasir Arafat.

Israel and Syria/Lebanon

¶3. (C) Pouille claimed there had been no breakthroughs in terms of reputed efforts to broker a meeting on the margins of the July 13 Paris summit of EU and Mediterranean leaders between Israeli PM Olmert and Syrian President Asad (see more in next tick). Although Pouille later refused to rule out the possibility of such a meeting, Olmert explained that the indirect talks with Damascus had not achieved a breakthrough for direct or more substantive talks to occur. If and when they reach such a point, Israel might ask France or the EU to help out. (Comment: We assume this would be in the event

the USG did not do so. End comment) With respect to Lebanon, the Israelis stated their desire to open up a direct channel to Beirut, even if they doubted it would be possible in the immediate future. Pouille was skeptical that the Lebanese could accept such a proposal, particularly given Israel's adamant refusal to consider placing Shab'a Farms under UN control as a prelude to a negotiating process that would lead to Israel's eventual withdrawal from that territory. (Comment: Pouille claimed not to have gone through all of the transcript from Sarkozy's meeting with Olmert but was unaware of any side discussions with the Israelis on Shab'a Farms during the visit. End comment) The French are not sure what to do next on Shab'a Farms but may propose in the fall some sort of reactivation of the mixed armistice committee created in 1949 as a forum for Israeli/Lebanese interaction.

Syria and the July 13 Paris Summit

14. (C) Syrian President Asad's attendance at the summit is now fully confirmed, but the Syrians, in addition to insisting that the French not attempt to push Asad into a meeting with Olmert, have established red lines about any efforts to seat the two delegations next to each other or create public situations in which the two leaders would have to acknowledge the other's presence. Syrian FM Mu'allim, as previously reported, will arrive in Paris July 4 to advance the Asad visit. Pouille admitted to one nagging French concern: the optic of Asad in Paris should the Lebanese still not have arrived at agreement on a new government. The one "consolation" in all this was that Asad's presence in Paris

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would facilitate Lebanese President Sleiman's attendance.

Continuing Rumors of a Sarkozy Visit to Damascus

15. (C) The latest take on these rumors is that Sarkozy might go to Damascus in August, i.e., after the Paris summit. Sarkozy fueled speculation when in Israel he gave a flip "why not?" answer to a reporter's shouted question about going to Damascus. Pouille refused to be drawn into detailed discussion except to remark that, as MFA and Elysee officials recently noted to visiting A/S Welch, Sarkozy would only make such a dramatic gesture to Syria's advantage if Sarkozy were convinced that Asad had successfully met certain "benchmarks" (presumably to include not hindering the formation of a new Lebanese government and not undermining the Union for the Mediterranean at the July 13 summit).

Saudi anger over France's invitation to Asad

16. (C) Pouille confirmed that the Saudis are extremely angry with the French decision to invite Asad to Paris for the July 13 summit and are accusing Sarkozy of "betrayal." The complaints have come from all levels of the Saudi government, starting with King Abdallah. Pouille said that France is holding firm and would certainly not withdraw the invitation as the Saudis have insisted.

Situation in Lebanon

17. (C) France is growing increasingly concerned about the failure of Lebanese political leaders to reach agreement on a new government. Pouille agreed that General Aoun was one of the main reasons for the impasse and that he was fully backed by Hizballah, although Hizballah was letting him lead the fight and standing in the background. The violence in northern Lebanon and elsewhere underlined the danger of a sudden slip back into generalized violence. Pouille noted intensifying Sunni paranoia over their relative lack of arms and militia capability vis-a-vis Hizballah, and he suggested

a split was opening up among supporters of Sa'd Hariri's Future Movement. He was not sure how serious it would get or whether dissident members would seek to acquire arms, but Pouille worried that vehement Sunni feeling toward the Shi'a would increase the ranks of the Salafists in Lebanon.

UNSC Action on Settlements

18. (C) In the course of this discussion, Pouille received a phone call from the Italian embassy asking about France's position on a draft Arab UNSCR on Israeli settlements. Pouille responded that France considers the draft balanced and essentially in line with French and EU policy on the subject. Against that background, he replied that France would agree to move to experts' discussions on June 30 to see whether the UNSC, assuming U.S. approval, could adopt the resolution. After hanging up, Pouille urged the USG not reject the draft out of hand (as he had heard Deputy Secretary Negroponte had done with the Libyans, who, as Arab representative on the UNSC, planned to submit the draft to the Council) but agree to discuss it. He claimed the draft went no further than official statements made by the USG, the EU, and the Quartet and would mollify Arab frustration. If the USG could not vote in favor of the resolution, Pouille called for us to show "wisdom" and abstain. We said we would pass the message back to Washington.

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